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Proactive leadership needed to protect pollinators at risk from pesticides

This past weekend (June 23/24) over 150 people of all ages gathered at Glacial Lakes State Park to learn about the Tallgrass Prairie and just how important this ecosystem is for pollinator habitat. With less than 1% of this rare ecosystem left, it is considered the most threatened natural environments and as such, the animals and insects that live there are threatened as well.

But while Minnesotans in our region and beyond care deeply about pollinators, our legislators are out of step. At the beginning of the 2017 session, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture offered two science-based bills to help tackle the decline in our bees, butterflies and other pollinators. These bills would have created a new funding stream to protect pollinators from pesticides, and closed a loophole that puts pollinators at risk from pesticides applied to seeds. These bills were based on a 3 year study that MDA conducted to find the best path forward for our state's pollinators, which are in serious trouble -- beekeepers have been losing about 50% of their bees, and some of our native butterflies are facing extinction.

Instead of rising to the challenge, the chairs of the agriculture committees -- Sen Westrom, Sen Weber, Rep Hamilton, and Rep Anderson -- removed all the pollinator programs from the agriculture bills before they even had a hearing. Then, they went further, going after the Department of Agriculture and seeking to gut their authority to oversee pesticide use in the state. Though advocates managed to keep the worst attacks from passing, by the end of the session, our legislators had done almost nothing for pollinators.

At the BioBlitz, I met dozens of Minnesotans who were eager to learn about the beneficial insects that live in our rural areas, and to help those critters however they could. But we can't do it alone -- we need proactive leadership from our legislators, not stall tactics and rollbacks. I hope that next year our legislators find their backbones and move forward a solid plan to support farmers and homeowners in reducing their pesticide use. Farmers, beekeepers, and any of us who eat Minnesota-grown food all depend on it. Don't forget that 1 in 3 foods we eat depend on pollinators to get to your table.

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